

THREEPENCE

Christian Mystics

No. 9

THERESA

. . OF . .

AVILA

BY

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LONDON

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Swainson  
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Theresa

# Theresa of Avila

THE SPANISH SAINT

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The object of these brief sketches on the "Christian Mystics," is to arouse interest in a subject but little known and still less understood. It is hoped that they may lead to a deeper study of the lives and works of those men and women whose influence on the world has been far greater than most people imagine.

# I

THERESA — INTENSITY OF THE SPANISH  
FAITH — CHRISTIAN AND MAHOMMEDAN  
— THERESA'S PARENTS — CHILDHOOD —  
EARLY PIETY — PERSONAL APPEARANCE  
— FEAR OF HELL — BECOMES A NUN.

**T**HERESA CEPEDA Y AHUMADA, generally known as Saint Theresa, was born when Spain was at the height of its power. The land had been wrested from the Moors inch by inch, after centuries of incessant fighting. For 700 years war had been waged between Goth and Saracen, Cross and Crescent. This had tended to make the Spanish people, not only intensely strong in their own faith, but intolerant of all others. The line of demarcation between Christian and Mahommedan was sharply drawn.

It was their common religion, and the struggle against the Moors, that bound the Spaniards together, rather than a sense of nationality; for each province was virtually a separate nation. Such a condition of things naturally produced strange contrasts. The age and nation that gave birth to Theresa and John of the Cross, produced also the gloomy and conscientious bigot Philip II.

It was at Avila, which had long been the outpost of Christendom in Spain, facing the Mahommedan world, that Theresa was born, on March 28th, 1515. Her childhood was passed under Charles V., the most powerful

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monarch of his time, who was succeeded by Philip II. During the reigns of these two monarchs, the Spaniards gradually developed into a nation of fanatics. From being one of the most tolerant of peoples, they became one of the most intolerant. Even Theresa, although very loving and sympathetic, was far more distressed at the danger she imagined the souls of unbelievers to be in, than she was at any torture endured by their bodies. It was not that the Spaniards at that period were worse than mankind as a whole are at the present day, but that their belief was more intense. The tolerance of the present day is largely the tolerance of indifference. The cruelty that our present civilizee inflicts on weaker races is not for faith, but greed; not to save their souls, but to exploit their bodies; and has even less justification than the tortures inflicted by the Inquisition. The latter was the intolerance of firm conviction; the former the lust of greed. The Inquisitors of Spain were at least sincere.

Theresa's father Alphonso was a man of solid piety, kind and benevolent to all with whom he came in contact. Her mother Beatrice, who was his second wife, was a very devout woman, of great natural beauty but delicate health.

As a child Theresa delighted in reading the lives of the saints. So early was she imbued with religious fervour, that at the age of seven she started off with her brother to seek martyrdom among the Moors. On reaching the city gates they were met by their uncle, who brought them back. Disappointed in their hope of martyrdom, they played at being hermits, and built little cells in the garden into which they could retire and pray.

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Theresa grew up tall and well proportioned, with black curling hair, black eyes, and good teeth. Her hands were small and exquisitely formed, while her manners were extremely fascinating. She was fond of dress, even using perfumes to make herself more attractive. Much of her spare time was now spent in reading romances and light literature.

In after years she looked back with sorrow to those days as hindering her spiritual growth. Compared with the sanctity to which she afterwards attained, the ordinary amusements of life, though perfectly harmless in themselves, and even useful in their right place, appeared to Theresa, by contrast, as sinful in their triviality. She seems to have been unduly self-accusative, for her purity was intact. She even asserts that desire was unknown to her. This is the more remarkable when we take into consideration the searching analysis she makes of her spiritual progress. In all this we may trace a certain resemblance to the introspection of Madame Guyon.

At the age of sixteen Theresa was placed by her father in a convent. While there her thoughts turned more and more inwardly. Although tender and devout, her religious ideas were in many respects harsh and severe in accordance with the age in which she lived. Her dislike of becoming a nun was neutralized by her greater dread of hell. She hoped, by foregoing pleasure in this life, to escape hell and possibly even purgatory, hereafter. Her motive was mainly selfish. She was a stranger to the perfect love that casts out fear. She had yet to learn that salvation is only to be found in seeking the salvation of others rather than one's own; that it is by losing our indi-



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vidual or sectional life that we find it again in the inheritance of all things.

She remained a year and a half in the convent, when she had a serious illness and was taken home. Actuated at length by a stern sense of duty, she begged her father to allow her to become a nun. On his refusing, she left home secretly and started for the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation which she reached on November 2nd, 1533. She was only eighteen years of age. The wrench of parting from her father was terrible, for as yet there was no realization of a Heavenly Father's love to fill the void. Impelled by fear rather than love she entered the convent, her father arriving in time to see her don the habit.

## II

THERESA'S ILLNESS—RETURNS TO THE CONVENT—REGAINS HER HEALTH—UNABLE TO PRAY—INABILITY OF HER CONFESSORS TO UNDERSTAND HER—HER PERIOD OF ARIDITY.

**T**HERESA had only been in the convent a year when her health gave way. She returned home for a time, when her father took her to Bercedas, a secluded village, where, it was hoped, she might recover. It was here that she first began to dimly realise the presence of Christ within. A severe illness ensued, and for four days she lay in a trance. But for her father persisting she was still alive, she would have been prematurely buried. She gradually recovered, but for a long time was unable to move. Finally, at her own request, she was carried back to the Convent of the Incarnation, on Palm Sunday, 1537. Here she remained for three years in a semi-paralysed condition. During this period fear slowly gave place to love, but as yet she was no more advanced spiritually than thousands of others.

At the end of three years she regained her health though she never fully recovered her strength. During the next eighteen years of her life, which she spent in the convent, she incessantly strove after perfection. Swayed between the aspirations of the soul and such worldly pleasures as were still open to her in the convent, her life was one continual warfare. Not until the end of that period did she reach her goal and attain "the peace that passeth all understanding."

For a time Theresa went through the form

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of prayer with scrupulous regularity, but she was still a stranger to that intimate communion with God which is the life of the soul. By degrees the invisible world, both good and evil, opened to her vision. On one occasion, she tells us, Christ himself appeared to her, while on another, toads and other loathsome creatures became visible to her sight.

At length Theresa could no longer pray. She felt it would be hypocrisy to attempt it. The heavens were as brass. She must lose all conscious touch with God before she could attain to the Supernal Vision. For a while her soul seemed dead. In reality she was being prepared for a leap upward to those higher regions to which she afterwards led others.

Theresa's confessors were powerless to help her; they rather needed her aid, for even at this period she was far ahead of them spiritually. No wonder the ordinary confessor was unable to comprehend her when the most subtle metaphysicians of the schools failed to follow her through the intricacies of her conscience.

But a change was taking place. Her time of aridity and despair—similar to "the obscure night of the soul" of John of the Cross, or Madame Guyon's period of "privation and desolation"—was about to pass away.

One day, on entering her oratory, her eyes fell upon the image of Christ with the blood streaming from the wounds caused by the crown of thorns. As she gazed on it her whole being was stirred. Her heart was rent in twain, and in floods of tears she cast herself down before it, beseeching Him, once for all, to give her strength not to offend Him more. Henceforth worldly desires and ambitions were dead. She was now forty-one years of age.

### III

DAZA AND SALCEDO—THE SUSPENSION OF THE SOUL—PADRANOS—THERESA'S MORTIFICATIONS—ALVAREZ—UNION WITH THE SUPREME—THERESA'S VISIONS.

A COMPLETE change of heart and purpose having taken place, Theresa turned to men of spiritual insight for guidance. She secured the services of two, Gaspar Daza, a priest, and Francis Salcedo, a married man, and to them she unburdened her soul.

At this period she was in the state she terms "the suspension of the soul." This was far beyond the comprehension of Daza, who refused to be her confessor. Salcedo, although equally unable to understand her, was more sympathetic, and listened patiently. Acting on their united advice she went to a Jesuit named Padranos, who, having more spiritual discernment than his predecessors, helped her somewhat with his advice.

She now began those mortifications which were continued till old age and infirmity caused her to modify them, as she tells us, at God's command. Following the advice of her confessors she not only wore a shirt pierced with holes like a nutmeg-grater, but even slept on a bed of briars and scourged herself with nettles till her body was covered with sores. Impelled by a sincere, though mistaken motive she did her utmost to literally crucify the flesh.

At the end of two years Padranos was removed elsewhere. This was a severe blow to

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Theresa, who found every earthly prop being taken from her. She must renounce all human aid, trust God wholly, and learn of Christ alone.

Her new confessor, Alvarez, instead of dictating to her, simply advised Theresa to commend her soul to God and recite the hymn "Veni Creator." Acting on his advice, she one day suddenly fell into a trance. At length she entered into conscious union with the Highest. That which years of weary striving had failed to accomplish was effected in a moment. Ceasing from her own efforts to attain holiness she allowed God to have His way. She heard the words: "Thou shalt no more converse with men, but with angels." Henceforth her love was centred on God alone and her life of sanctity began. From this time she became unable to form any real friendship except with those who loved and served her Lord.

She now began not only to hear heavenly voices or, as she calls them, divine "locutions" more frequently, but also, whenever she was at prayers, felt Christ close to her. This aroused the suspicions of the Inquisitors who naturally looked with no favourable eye upon anything pertaining to Mysticism. There was even a danger, at one time, of her being burnt as a heretic; yet it was through her visions and revelations that she gained that character of sanctity for which she became famous. Even her most intimate friends told her that her visions were from the devil. Although she never looked upon them as in any way adding to her goodness, she denied the assertions of her friends and pointed to the purity of her life as sufficient answer to their insinuations. Assured that it was Christ Himself who had

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bidden her converse no more with men but with angels, she determined henceforth to live solely for God.

Alvarez was not always at Avila and Theresa was compelled at times to resort to her former confessors, who persisted in telling her she was a prey to delusions. They even went so far as to forbid her the practice of mental prayer, whereupon Christ appeared to her in a vision and bade her continue as hitherto.

Some of her visions were very remarkable. One of the most striking was of hell, or those lower regions where self-centred spirits dwell until purged and purified. She describes the entrance as being like "a low, dark, and narrow oven; and the ground appeared to be like mire, exceedingly filthy, stinking insupportably, and swarming with vermin. At the end of it was a little hole, like a press in the wall, into which I found myself thrust, and close bent up. The torment of this press was indescribable. . . . I saw that there was no room for the least hope. Thus was I thrust into this place like a hole in the wall, and the walls—too horrible for the sight—press in on one so that everything there chokes and stifles. There is nothing but dense darkness, without a ray, and yet, I know not how, though there is no light, one sees all that can affect the sight. . . . I was so amazed at this sight that even now—six years after I saw the vision—my blood curdles in my veins as I think of it. And whatever pains I may now suffer, when I recall what I then endured, at once all that can be suffered in this life seems to be nothing at all."

She often saw the Saviour, but was unable to describe Him, His appearance being so overpowering. In one vision she saw, as it



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were, a mirror without frame and without dimensions, with Christ shining in the centre of it, and the mirror, she knew not how, was in Christ.

This shows that at times she was intromitted into what is called the "fourth dimension," that in which our first ancestors lived before they fell, and the goal to which we must, sooner or later, attain.

About this period of her life Theresa received the transfixion of her heart. Her mind was so fixed on the thought of Christ's sufferings that her heart became imprinted with a wound on either side. This transfixion of the heart is similar to the stigmata of Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Sienna, and others. In exceptional cases intensity of concentration causes the inner, or invisible, to visibly stamp its signature, or leave its mark, on the outer.

### IV

THERESA BEGINS HER REFORM OF THE CARMELITE ORDER—ST. JOSEPH'S FOUNDED—RULES LAID DOWN—QUIET LIFE—OTHER REFORMED HOUSES ESTABLISHED—HER JOURNEYS AND PRIVATIONS—PRIORESS OF THE INCARNATION—IMPRISONMENT AT TOLEDO—HER LAST YEARS—DEATH.

AT this time the Reformation was making great progress in Europe. Theresa, as a devout Roman Catholic, was naturally alarmed at the spread of doctrines which she conceived to be fraught with grave danger to the souls of all who held them. She believed the falling away from the true faith was mainly due to the laxity of the religious orders, and determined to do what she could to prevent it. With this aim in view she began her work of reforming the order to which she belonged.

She obtained permission to establish a convent in which the rules should be more stringent. As soon as it became known, however, such an outcry arose that the scheme had to be abandoned for a time; but Theresa persevered, and a private house was secretly prepared to serve as a small convent. When the Papal Bull finally arrived Theresa departed from the Convent of the Incarnation on leave, and installed four poor women in the new house, which was dedicated to St. Joseph. On August 24th, 1562, Mass was said and the new order constituted.

In the rules laid down by Theresa the sisters were to wear sandals of rope, sleep on straw,



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eat no meat, be confined to the cloister, do needlework for the benefit of the poor, and live on alms without any regular endowment.

After lodging her four sisters Theresa returned, as in duty bound, to the Convent of the Incarnation.

When it was known what Theresa had done both Carmelites and townspeople were furious, and a general commotion ensued. Fortunately violence was prevented. The Provincial eventually gave Theresa leave to remove from the Incarnation, and take charge of the new convent. The sisters soon increased to thirteen, to which number they were restricted, and Theresa spent the next five years of her life in peace and happiness, during which time she constantly had visions.

At the end of that period permission was given to her to found other reformed houses, and the last fifteen years of her life were spent mainly in journeys for that purpose. Occasionally she travelled on foot, but generally in a rude cart, in all weathers. Convents were established by her at Medina, Malaga, Valladolid, Toledo, Segovia, Salamanca, and Alva, after which Theresa rested for three years, having been appointed prioress of her old convent of the Incarnation.

She next went to Seville. The latent hostility of the old order broke out again and, through the efforts of her enemies, she was confined for two years at Toledo.

The few remaining years of her life were spent in organising the new order and opening new convents, till no less than sixteen convents and fourteen monasteries were founded by her efforts. Possessing neither house nor money, this poor barefooted nun accomplished her work solely through her indomitable will,

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and her supreme faith in God. At times she endured terrible hardships. Her own nuns did not always obey her; even those at St. Joseph's mutinied for a meat diet.

But her end was drawing near. Reaching the convent at Alva her health gave way and she never left it again. She suffered great bodily pain in her last illness. Presently her face became bright and assumed a youthful appearance. Claspng her hands she exclaimed, "Oh! my Lord . . . at last the longed-for hour has come . . . to leave this exile."

For fourteen hours she lay in the arms of Sister Ann of Bartholomew, holding a crucifix all the time. At length, on the night of October 4th, 1582, her face became illumined with a great light and her soul was released from its earthly tenement.

Shortly after her death Theresa appeared to several of her children scattered in the different convents. To one monk, who saw her in a radiant vision, she said, "We here in heaven and you there on earth must be one in love and purity; we above seeing the Divine Essence, and you on earth adoring the most Holy Sacrament."

She was buried at Alva, where she died. Nine months later the coffin was opened, when the body was found incorrupt. In 1585 her body, which had been mutilated, was secretly removed to Avila but was brought back the following year to Alva. In 1594 it was laid in a magnificent tomb. From time to time it has been disinterred with the result that relic seekers have secured portions, so that the remains are now scattered throughout Europe. Thus was idolized after her death the woman who during her life was suspected of being under the influence of the devil.

## V

THERESA'S CHARACTER—INTELLECTUAL AS WELL AS MYSTICAL—HUMILITY—ANALYSIS OF HER SPIRITUAL PROGRESS—COMMON SENSE—APTITUDE FOR PRAYER—VISIONS—POWER OF ORGANISATION—SENSE OF HUMOUR—INFLUENCE OVER OTHERS.

**T**HERESA was not merely a devout Catholic saint, as many people imagine, but a woman who was great in every sense. While on the one hand she could scale the loftiest heights of mystic contemplation, on the other she was eminently practical. Combined with deep spirituality and supreme faith in God, was a strong natural affection. She possessed a clear mind, a shrewd judgment, and a powerful understanding. Her handwriting was bold, clear, and vigorous like a man's, revealing the character of the woman. She was bright, cheerful, free from melancholy and full of courage, at the same time a Mystic of the highest rank, a seer of visions, and a teacher of others in the way of perfection.

In her diet Theresa was most abstemious. A biscuit or two, an egg, and a few peas and beans were her daily food, varied perhaps, on feast days with a slice of fish, and grapes or raisins.

She never sought distinction, being humble to a fault, as shown in her submissiveness to her confessors. Simple as a child she was never known either to tell or act a lie. She

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sought for instruction in the Gospels, the writings of St. Augustine, and the early fathers. Although she divides, subdivides, and schedules the various stages of the soul's progress, there is nothing unhealthily morbid about her introspection; rather do we see the working of a fearless soul analysing her spiritual growth by the aid of her great intellect and fervent will. Although others have reached the same spiritual heights no one has left a more methodical survey of them. Theresa maps out with scientific exactitude and extraordinary lucidity the supernatural experiences of Mysticism, such as only one who united a clear and logical intellect with the most profound spiritual experience could. Mediævalism has produced no more unselfish, heroic, or clever woman, none more gifted with common sense than Theresa of Avila.

Her aptitude for prayer was wonderful, being one of the most remarkable traits in her character. All her strength was derived from the intensity of her prayers. No woman ever prayed more than Theresa. Her whole life was one of prayer. She literally prayed without ceasing.

Many look upon her visions as the outcome of a disordered imagination, and the incoherent fancies of a hysterical woman. Yet no one was less hysterical than Theresa. Her life was orderly and disciplined, her intellect keen and penetrating. She relates her visions with the utmost calmness, maintaining a strict control over her feelings, regulating each experience to its proper place, all the time drawing a clear distinction between imaginary visions and those of a divine origin. Her visions being, like Blake's, mental rather than astral it was well nigh impossible for the lower class

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of spirits to deceive her. When Christ appeared to her in vision she recognised Him, not merely by external vision, which may be counterfeited, but by inward perception. Profoundly as Theresa believed in her visions—and it is worse than foolish for anyone to deny them simply because they have never had a similar experience—she saw clearly the danger attaching to such experiences, and never laid claim to any superior holiness on account of them. They were a trial rather than a pleasure to her.

Her power of organisation and business aptitude were wonderful, as evidenced by her successful reformation of the Carmelite order. At an age when most people begin to think of taking things quietly, Theresa sallied forth without money and without friends to accomplish the Herculean task of reforming a great order. She did not attempt to save society through politics, which only affect external things, but by personal regeneration. She realised the truth, that if we would reform the world we must begin by reforming ourselves.

Theresa was by no means lacking in the sense of humour. As an instance of it, when some young monks, following the idea of chivalry so common in Spain at that time, challenged Theresa and her nuns to feats of penance, she replied with keen satire, touching on the weaknesses of each of her own party as follows:—

“Sister Anne of Burgos says that if any knight will pray the Lord to grant her humility, and the prayer is answered, she will give him all the merits which she may hereafter earn.

“Sister Beatrice Juarez says that she will give to any knight who will pray the Lord to

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give her grace to hold her tongue till she has considered what she has to say, two years of the merits which she has gained in tending the sick.

“Sister Isabel de la Cruz will give two years merits to any knight who will induce the Lord to take away her self-will.

“Theresa de Jesus says that if any knight will resolve firmly to obey a superior who may be both a fool and a glutton she will give him on the day on which he forms such a resolution half her own merits for that day—or, indeed, the whole of them—for the whole will be very little.”

Theresa had not a high opinion of the capacity of men for understanding women, and in this she was not far from the truth. Men, as a rule, lack that insight into things which so many women possess. The warmer affection and intenser spirituality of woman often enables her to see those deeper and more interior truths that the coldly logical intellect of man fails to grasp.

Theresa's influence over those with whom she came in contact was remarkable. Even Philip II., whom the grandees of Spain never addressed but on their bended knees, condescended to lay aside his rank and talk familiarly with this poor homely woman who addressed him as “my son.”



## VI

### THERESA'S WRITINGS—FOUR DEGREES OF PRAYER—THE WAY OF PERFECTION—THE LORD'S PRAYER.

**T**HERESA'S writings are so intensely spiritual that only those who have themselves entered the mystical regions where she loved to dwell can fully comprehend them. In them she lays bare her inward condition with a frankness equal to St. Augustine or Thomas à Kempis.

Her "Life," written in 1561-2, is one of the few really great biographies, being both intellectual and spiritual. In addition to her autobiography she wrote sundry "Relations," "The Way of Perfection," the "Book of the Foundations," "Interior Castle, or the Seven Mansions," and "Conceptions of the Love of God." Her "Letters" were written during the last twenty years of her life.

Theresa—like Madame Guyon—divides prayer into four degrees. The first is *simple mental prayer*. In this state the soul is not excluded from using words, although it is, as it were, withdrawn within itself, entering into a fervent condition. This is the lowest and simplest form of prayer.

The second degree of prayer is the *prayer of quiet, or pure contemplation*. In this state the will becomes wholly passive and absorbed in God, though the understanding and memory remain active.

The third degree is the *prayer of union*, or

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*perfect contemplation*. Here, not only the will, but the understanding and memory also are swallowed up in God. They are not absolutely inactive, but being in a purely passive, or receptive condition, are simply instruments in God's hands.

The fourth degree is the *prayer of rapture, or ecstasy*. This is the highest and most interior of all, and the most to be desired. The bodily as well as the mental powers become absolutely passive. Unlike the prayer of union, in which it is possible to resist the divine influx to some extent, one becomes powerless, and unconscious of all external things.

Theresa compares the nature and effect of prayer on the soul in the following simple yet beautiful words, pregnant with truth as a Gospel parable:

"A man is directed to make a garden in a bad soil, overrun with sour grasses. The lord of the land roots out the weeds, sows seeds, and plants herbs and fruit trees. The gardener must then care for them and water them, that they may thrive and blossom, and that the lord may find pleasure in his garden and come to visit it. There are four ways in which the watering may be done. There is water which is drawn wearily by hand from the well. There is water drawn by the ox-wheel, more abundantly and with lighter labour. There is water brought in from the river, which will saturate the whole ground; and last, there is rain from heaven. Four sorts of prayer correspond to these. The first is a weary effort with small returns; the well may run dry; the gardener then must weep. The second is internal prayer and meditation upon God; the trees will then show leaves

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and flower-buds. The third is love of God; the virtues then become vigorous; we converse with God face to face; the flowers open and give out fragrance. The fourth kind cannot be described in words. Then there is no more toil, and the seasons no longer change; flowers are always blowing, and fruit ripens perennially. The soul enjoys undoubting certitude; the faculties work without effort and without consciousness; the heart loves, and does not know that it loves; the mind perceives, yet does not know that it perceives. If the butterfly pauses to say to itself how prettily it is flying, the shining wings fall off, and it droops and dies. The life of the spirit is not our life, but the life of God within us."

Perhaps the most interior of Theresa's writings is "The Way of Perfection." It was written at the request of the nuns of St. Joseph's to help them in their spiritual life, and contains the flower of her heart and mind. What gives the book a greater charm is that it deals largely with her own experience.

After giving the reasons why she founded St. Joseph's, Theresa goes on to speak of love, drawing a distinction between pure love and that which is mixed. The former is entirely spiritual; the latter, although spiritual, is not wholly so, being intermingled with sensuality, or at least a desire that it should be reciprocated. Pure love ever gives, kindling in the soul an insatiable desire for the welfare of others.

Passing on to the subject of detachment, Theresa points out that detachment from the world is insufficient, unless we are free from the bondage of our sinful thoughts and desires. It is like a man "that lies down very quietly, having fast bolted his doors for fear of thieves,

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whilst he hath them in his house." We must mortify our own wills and desires, and never seek honour, but live in all true humility as followers of Jesus Christ.

In chapter seventeen Theresa enters on the subject of prayer, mental prayer being the lowest. This is followed by contemplation, which can only be attained as we become truly virtuous. But all cannot be contemplatives. True humility consists in being willing to serve, if need be, with Martha. "Let the Master of the house do what he pleases. . . . He understands what is fittest for you, and what also for Himself." The test of proficiency is not whether one is more rapt in prayer, or has greater visions, but whether she thinks nothing of herself. She naively adds "perhaps she who thinks herself lowest is highest in the eyes of God."

Nuns, Theresa says, who have devoted their lives to the service of God should "speak of nothing save only God, this being their vocation and language: whosoever would converse with them let him learn it." She adds: "it is unlikely that one who understands no Arabic should delight to discourse much with him that knows no other tongue. They have nothing in common." The natural man cannot understand spiritual things.

Speaking of vocal prayer, Theresa asserts that unless the understanding and the heart assent, in no sense can it be called prayer. One is thus necessitated to use mental prayer. Our thoughts must be fixed on God if we would address Him in prayer.

Theresa then takes "The Lord's Prayer," upon which she builds her simple rules and suggestions for prayer. She touches first on the words "Our Father," and the love He

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bears to His children, after which she deals with the words "Who art in heaven." Just as the Supreme more immediately dwells in heaven, the inmost sphere of the universe, so we find, sooner or later, that God dwells in our inmost soul.

In chapter thirty Theresa begins to speak of the prayer of quiet. "It would seem," she writes, "that it would have sufficed had our Lord merely said, 'Give us, Father, that which is expedient for us'; but the Lord in His wisdom knew the needs of sinful men and women and framed the prayer accordingly. In the words 'hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come unto us,' we petition that the kingdom of heaven should come into us." She goes on to describe fully the prayer of quiet. This is supernatural, and is attained without effort on our part, just as day breaks independently of our efforts. Although the soul understands God in this state, it knows not how it understands.

Coming to the petition "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," Theresa applies it to the third degree of prayer, or perfect contemplation. Theresa writes, "We on our part do nothing. We neither labour nor negotiate at all . . . for all . . . disturbs and hinders save the saying, *Fiat voluntas Tua*—'Thy will be done.'"

In dealing with the words "give us this day our daily bread," Theresa states that she consciously realised the presence of Christ when partaking of the Holy Sacrament.

In chapter thirty-six she passes on to the petition "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." She remarks that our Lord does not bid us say "as we will forgive," but "as we forgive." "Forgive us for we for-

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give": this is the key that unlocks the most interior casket of the soul, whereby we reach the highest degree of prayer, that of rapture, or ecstasy. Whatever imperfections and shortcomings may still exist in souls in this state, in one thing they never fail, that is in instant forgiveness of any injuries done them. Only as we fully and freely forgive can we reach this degree of spiritual experience.

Coming to the last petition, Theresa touches on the love and fear of God. She concludes by declaring that she had been specially helped by our Lord to point out how His own prayer contains the whole doctrine of the way of perfection.



## VII

DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF MYSTICISM—  
THERESA'S GREAT LOVE—APPRECIATION  
—THERESA'S MORTIFICATIONS—SELF-  
SURRENDER THE ALPHA AND OMEGA OF  
CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM.

**M**YSTICISM expresses itself in different ways according to the environment in which it appears. In Theresa and John of the Cross we see it manifesting through the rites and ceremonies of the Roman Church. Under Protestantism it assumes a somewhat different external garb, as represented by George Fox, John Bunyan, or Jacob Boehme. We can no more imagine Theresa of Avila a Protestant than we can John Bunyan a Romanist; yet, in spite of all their apparent differences, John Bunyan and Theresa are essentially one. Christian Mysticism pivots on direct intercourse with Christ, by means of the inner light, apart from tradition, man, or book. This inner light—common to all Mystics—not only reveals the Christ within, but witnesses to the truth that this indwelling Christ is the same that incarnated for us men and our salvation in the person of Jesus. The one is involved within the other. To deny either is to deny both.

Theresa was so devoted to Jesus that she assumed the name of Theresa of Jesus to show the closeness of her union with Him. In place of the old pagan doctrine, "Man, know thyself," she substituted the Christian dogma that we can only understand the mystery of man by knowing God.

A supreme faith in God and loving sympathy with His creatures breathe through all her

## *Theresa of Avila*

thoughts, actions and words. Love, such as few mortals have felt, dwelt in her heart. Misery and evil, she maintained, resulted from the absence of love. "Hell," she writes, "is the inability to love or be loved."

Alexander Whyte, the Scotch Evangelical Protestant, in his appreciation of Theresa, the Spanish Catholic Saint, remarks "What letters hers are, all sealed with the name of Jesus—she will seal with no other seal. What letters of a strong and sound mind go out under that seal! What a business head! What shrewdness, sagacity, insight, frankness, boldness, archness, raillery, downright fun! And all as full of splendid sense as an egg is full of meat."

Mrs. Cunningham Graham, a very different type of mind says, "To my thinking Theresa is at her best in her 'Way of Perfection,' with its bursts of impassioned eloquence, its shrewd and caustic irony; its acute and penetrating knowledge of human character, the same in the convent as in the world; above all in its sympathetic and tender instinct for the needs and difficulties of her daughters."

A character like this is not merely a disciple of the Jesus of the churches, but of the Jesus as revealed to us in the gospels. Theresa was no blind admirer of the ecclesiastical powers of her day; neither was she a saint who could forget the claims of natural affection; she was human to the core. When her father was dying she left the convent to tend him; besides which she always kept up a constant intercourse with her family.

Many look—and naturally—with anything but a favourable eye upon Theresa's mortifications. Yet, severe as were her own penances, she deprecated excessive asceticism in the case of others. Perfection, she was well aware,

### *Theresa of Avila*

is not reached through mortification, but through love; still, she realised that it is impossible to attain to the pure love of God while earthly attachments hold down the soul. This is at the root of the idea of the necessity of mortifying the flesh.

In criticizing Theresa because of her mortifications we must bear in mind the age and country in which she lived. God was looked upon in those days as the All Holy, All Powerful, All Wise, and All Just, as One who would exact the uttermost farthing, but not as the All Loving and All Beautiful. Theresa was taught that only by mortifying her body could she save her soul, that to become united to God she must cut herself off from man. Yet, in spite of this, so great was her love—and love, not intellect, is ever the key that unlocks truth—she realised that love to God involved love to man. Starting with the truth that if we would know God we must seek Him within, not outside, ourselves, she learned during her life of struggle, its complimentary truth that the pathway to God lies through, not away from, man. The more divine one becomes, the more truly human he is, God Himself being the Divine Human.

Theresa's life was purity itself, being one long act of self-sacrifice. Absolute self-surrender is the key on which Christian Mysticism pivots, the only way in which Christ can enter in and take full possession of the soul. Wherever Christianity is preached this truth holds a more or less prominent, but still an incidental place. With the Mystic it is his "Alpha and Omega." It is this which makes the Mystics a little flock within the Christian herd. With Theresa Mysticism was the science of a hidden life. Her life was hid with Christ in God, not as a mere expression, but as a vital fact.

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